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Military Role of A-11 Still Seems a Secret

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The United States has successfully flown the world's most advanced warplane, but apparently hasn't decided yet what military role it will fill.

Developed in secret and announced with a splash at President Johnson's first televised news conference Saturday, the experimental Lockheed A-11 aircraft still is shrouded in mystery.

As the President said, the A-11 has been successfully tested in "sustained flight" at better than 2000 miles an hour and at altitudes above 70,000 feet, and has a range of "thousands of miles." Existing combat planes have a top speed of about 1600 m.p.h. for short range.

Unquestionably, the United States has a prototype for a military plane of phenomenal performance, but what is it for?

In his carefully worded announcement, Mr. Johnson said the A-11 is undergoing extensive tests to determine its capability as a long-range interceptor plane. It is so regarded by many at the Pentagon, who are debating the need for replacing existing 900 to 1400 m.p.h. short-range air defense interceptors tied to ground radar control—highly vulnerable to ICBM attack—with a new long range higher speed, higher altitude planes carrying their own intercept radar.

The A-11 can be put into production as such an advanced interceptor. But Defense

Secretary Robert S. McNamara and his top advisers have not yet been convinced that a \$3 billion interceptor replacement program is necessary.

President Johnson did not mention it, but the A-11 also could be useful as a reconnaissance plane. In fact, it seems highly likely that when originally designed and ordered into development in 1959, the A-11 was intended to follow the high-flying U-2 reconnaissance craft.

Lockheed developed the U-2, a fragile, 500-mile-an-hour aircraft which relied on its reported 90,000-foot altitude to survive on reconnaissance flights. What is now described as the A-11—and which may have been originally the "U-33"—may go as high as the U-2 at three times the speed of sound.

Gary Power's U-2 was downed over Russia on May 1, 1960, possibly by Soviet missiles, and two other U-2s subsequently have been almost certainly shot down by

Russian missiles over China and Cuba. An advanced "U-3," therefore, could have a reconnaissance mission in some circumstances, but the United States has developed Samos reconnaissance satellites that reportedly can better perform the U-2's strategic "spy in the sky" role.

President Johnson said that the A-11 development will "greatly assist" in the development of a commercial supersonic airliner as well as other military planes. The A-11 prototypes, however, cannot be directly adapted to development of a transport or bomber.

Several things stand in the way of the Air Force's strong proposals to put the A-11 into production as a long-range interceptor. McNamara and his technical advisers feel that present interceptors can handle existing Russian bombers, and the A-11 will be needed only if the Soviet Union develops a 1700-to-2000 mile-an-hour bomber.

There is no definite intelligence information that Moscow has such a bomber in the works, other than word that it plans a transport with such speed. But, it is stressed, historically, the Russians usually have based their airliners on secretly developed bombers.

Air Force chiefs also de-

clare that a new interceptor is needed to get to existing Russian bombers over the Arctic before they can launch long-range air-to-ground standoff missiles like the Hound Dog or the aborted Skybolt which may be in the Soviet arsenal.

But Defense officials suggest that the less-advanced interceptor version of the TFX, being developed for the Navy, may fulfill this need at less cost. They also feel that American superiority over Russia in offensive strategic missiles and bombers should prove a sufficient deterrent against an all-out Soviet attack.

Admittedly, the A-11 interceptor, if built and deployed, could save millions of lives in case of nuclear war. But many Pentagon leaders take the view that a \$3.5 billion Civil Defense fall-out shelter program—urged by McNamara but not accepted by Congress—and a \$15 billion anti-ICBM program—favored by many at the Capitol but not yet accepted by McNamara—take priority over a new interceptor in this respect.

At any rate, the A-11 does not yet have a mission as an interceptor, and if it has another approved role, this is one of the still unexplained mysteries about the exceptional new experimental aircraft.

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